



May 29, 2020

Greetings Members of the Council,

I thank you in advance for taking the time to read my testimony.

My name is Jonida Spahija. I am a resident of Ward 8, parent to a 5-year old who attends Latin American Montessori Bilingual in Ward 5, a PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Parent Leader in Education board member, a working professional and a doctoral student at University of Southern California. Most recently, you could say I also became a full-time kindergarten teacher as a result of the pandemic.

During this time of uncertainty, I have had opportunities to dream and to reflect. My dreams take me to an educational utopia where there is a shift in focus of school so that race does not predict outcome. My reflections bring me back to a harsh reality of the intractable problems that our children face with their education. There seems to be a strong belief that between innovative thinking and research that these problems can be solved. I see a huge gap within that confined thinking that lacks equity, investment, and action. In the spirit of engagement and in an effort to bridge that gap, I am writing to you as your constituent to share some of these insights as to how I believe DC should try to respond and recover from this crisis.

Like other parents across the district, my experience with home-schooling has been challenging. An extended day at LAMB has been reduced to 15-minute circle time, four times a week, where the attention of the lead teacher is divided by twenty-four students aged 3-5. While I am grateful for the steps the Council has taken already to respond to this pandemic, this crisis will require additional bold investments in education and other services in order to help students catch-up – academically, socially and emotionally.

Traditionally, I have unfairly placed full accountability on teachers for my daughter's success. During this pandemic, I feel that accountability being unfairly shifted to me as a parent. Even though Washington DC was reported as the only place where students posted gains in three out of four grade-subject combinations late last year, the reality is that the district battles a history of inequity and segregation in its system. School administrators, teachers, and policymakers must acknowledge that they are part of the problem and assume the responsibility for implementing changes that better serve students.

I know that you are already aware of the disparities. I want kindly to remind you that families live these realities on a daily basis. There is a clear correlation between lack of resources and support having negative consequences on students' abilities to learn and achievements in schools. If we thought our children were falling behind while operating on a full-time schedule,



rest assured that gap has and will continue to widen. When making your funding decisions, I urge you to consider all of the benefits that OST programs provide, especially for students in under-served communities. Ask yourself what you can do to support efforts to develop and deliver high-quality programs. Not only do you have the power to support student academic achievement, but you can also play an integral role in reducing health disparities and changing the course of young lives.

Many OST programs focus on providing students with the extra time and attention they need to improve in the core academic areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Other OST programs aim to expose youth to skills and opportunities they do not receive during the regular school hours. We know that students have been falling behind during distance learning contributing to an even larger academic gap. We also know that students have missed interaction with other kids leading to a higher need for social emotional learning. Much research has focused on the increased risk youth face during the out-of-school hours. Particular attention has been paid to the after-school hours of 3 to 6 pm which are well-documented to be the peak hours during the school year that youth commit crime, become victims of crime, smoke, drink, or use drugs and engage in sexual activity. Research confirms that quality OST programs can serve as powerful youth violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and dropout prevention strategies. Between the cost of incarcerating juveniles, the cost of providing assistance programs to teen parents, and the decreased earning and tax potential of dropouts, cities and states could save millions of dollars by investing in quality OST programs. It is imperative that we continue to create and fund programs that support our kids and share that workload with teachers and parents.

Thank you again for your time and support. On behalf of other parents, we appreciate all that you do but please know that we have a long way to go and we need you to do your part.

Sincerely,

Jonida Spahija